ACTION UPDATE

WINTER 2018

Supporting garment workers worldwide

LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

Welcome

This issue looks at the potential for devastation as the Bangladesh Transition Accord, protecting the safety of Bangladeshi garment workers, is in peril due to a High Court injunction to remove it, jeopardising the safety of millions of workers. Remaining in Bangladesh, we look at the desperate action workers are taking, including going on hunger strike, to demand an increase to the minimum wage. There is information on the UK's home-grown sweatshop factories in Leicester, as well as our Black Friday action in the face of H&M's failed promise to pay a living wage. We also celebrate the success of our Invisible Threads fundraising Art Auction, which raised an amazing £2,800. Thank you for your continued support – without you our work wouldn't be possible. Whether you stand with us outside shops, attend demonstrations, donate, sign petitions or fundraise for us, it all helps to make change happen.

In solidarity,

Caroline, Dominique and Anna
The Labour Behind the Label Team

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Labour Behind the Label Limited supports garment workers' efforts worldwide to improve their working conditions. It is a not-for-profit cooperative company, registered in England No. 4173634. The Labour Behind the Label Trust is a separate organisation that raises funds for the organisation's charitable activities, registered charity number 1159356.

LUSH FRESH HANDMADE COSMETICS

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Labour Behind the Label at a glance

Labour Behind the Label campaigns for garment workers' rights worldwide, supporting garment workers in their struggle to live in dignity and work in safety. We believe that everyone with a stake in the garment industry has a responsibility to improve conditions – workers need to join together and demand better rights, consumers need to take ethics into account in the way that they shop and enter into dialogue with companies, governments need to step in and defend workers' rights through legislation, and companies, especially the big brands at the top of the supply chain, need to be accountable to their workers.

Black Friday Action on Living Wage

Black Friday, the American-inspired discount day, is now a firm date on the British calendar and Black Friday week heralds a spike in consumer spending, building year on year. The financial gains made by brands is never passed on to their garment workers. This Black Friday we took a stand against frenzied consumerism and unethical brand practices. Joined by activists and supporters in a global week of action, we called for H&M to Turn Around and keep its 2013 promise to pay garment workers a living wage.

Five years ago, and to much media fanfare, H&M promised to pay a living wage to 850,000 workers in its key supplier factories by the end of 2018. These workers produce approximately 60% of its garments. In order to achieve its aim, it would have to improve purchasing practices, encourage governments to set a living minimum wage, and support factory workers in their fight for fair pay.

The end of 2018 now looms large, and with it so does the deadline set by H&M. However, recent wage slips gathered by workers in Cambodia, India, Bulgaria and Turkey, show that H&M workers are still earning only a third or, at most, half of the amount they need to live with dignity and support a family. In some cases this is even lower. For example, Bulgarian garment workers sewing for H&M are reportedly paid just 9% of what is considered a living wage. H&M's garment workers are living

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well below the poverty line, with excessive overtime a common factor, often beyond the legal maximum limit. In one Turkish factory workers were expected to work 45 hours extra per week during peak times, and yet still only took home a poverty wage.

Such dire working conditions, including poverty, lack of adequate food and fatigue from long working hours, has resulted in many workers fainting while at work. In one Cambodian supplier factory two thirds of the workers interviewed had fainted during a shift. Bulgarian workers viewed fainting as an everyday occurrence in their factories, with workers even reportedly being fired for fainting at work. Although H&M trades on having a more 'ethical' image, there is clearly much work left for it to do before that image reflects the reality of its workers.

When challenged on its failure to keep its promise, H&M has tried to back out of its original commitment, rowing back to reduce its aim from paying a living wage to helping supplier factories to implement improved wage management systems. According to their 2017 Sustainability Report, this wage management system has reached 375,000 workers. This is far from what it promised workers. Instead of a wage management system, H&M needs to publish a transparent, time-bound roadmap detailing how it will change its purchasing practices to ensure measurable wage increases are met and that workers earn a living wage.

To hold H&M accountable we organised a public action outside its Oxford Circus store in London on Black Friday, and are asking people to sign a petition demanding H&M keep their promises. Approximately 138,000 people have signed it so far, so please add your name to let one of the major high street stores know it cannot renege on its promises with impunity.

Sign the petition: **act.wemove.eu/campaigns/Living-Wages-HM**

Home-Grown Sweatshops

Britain was once at the global heart of textile production, yet manufacturing fell rapidly into decline once new and cheaper markets opened up during the mass globalisation of the 80s. With cheaper labour and other costs offered by countries such as Bangladesh and China, garment brands moved their manufacturing overseas. In recent years there has been something of a small-scale resurgence, with 'Made in Britain' labels donning the clothing of small, independent brands keen to distance themselves from the image of sweatshops associated with fast fashion high street giants.

There is, however, a dark underbelly to the home-grown garment trade, and that is the existence of illegal sweatshops in cities such as Leicester. These aim to fulfil fast-fashion consumer desires, with quick turn around times catching ever-changing trends (even quicker than factories abroad given that they have eliminated shipping costs and times), and rock-bottom prices. The workers in these factories, often immigrants with little understanding of their rights, earn well under the legal minimum wage (£7.83 for workers over 25), with some earning as little as £3.50 per hour.

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Just as sweatshop factories in countries such as Bangladesh and India often do not comply with safe working regulations, neither do the illegal sweatshops in the UK. Hastily set up in buildings not designed to house machinery, they may lack adequate fire equipment or emergency exits, as well as using unsafe machinery or not supplying workers with appropriate safety wear. As these factories operate outside the legal framework, workers may be forced to work long hours with excessive overtime, and still not earn enough to live in dignity.

It is the world of online fast fashion retailers, in particular, who have been accused of sourcing from illegal UK sweatshops. Retailers including Asos, Boohoo and Missguided, all of whom target young millenials following the fast pace of instagram trends, were called before parliament in November to answer questions on poverty pay and environmental concerns. Brands including Asos and Missguided are members of the Ethical Trading Initiative and purport to be

UK Sweatshops

working to address unethical issues in the industry, however their buying practices, demanding ever-lower prices at fast turn-around times, undermine these efforts. By putting undue pressure on factory owners and refusing to pay a fair price for items, it becomes unmanageable for factory owners to pay a living wage to their workers.

It is good news that our government is listening to concerns on illegal practices in the UK garment trade. Thorough investigations must take place in order to learn the full scope of the problem. There must be tighter inspections with tougher penalties for retailers who sources from illegal UK sweatshops. Without a firm stance, the UK sweatshop trade will continue to exploit workers and churn out clothing for sale at ridiculously low prices.

Ultimately, the fast fashion business model needs to be replaced with a business model that is sustainable and ethical. Fast fashion operates on the simple premise of selling more for less. At its inescapable core is exploitation. The human cost is high, as is the environmental one. Cheap clothing, not made to last and viewed as disposable once the latest trend hits the shelves, is piling up. As a culture we continue to consume without adequate concern for how we dispose of items and the harm it is causing to our planet.

It is vital that we campaign for the rights of garment workers here in the UK, working in dangerous and illegal conditions and paid poverty wages. Although these covert sweatshops are not highly visible, we know they exist.

Please enable us to work on this issue by supporting our campaign here: **labourbehindthelabel.org/uncover-the-uk-garment-industry/** to ensure that 'Made in Britain' does not become synonymous with 'Made in a Sweatshop'.

Urgent Appeal Update

We have been campaigning on several new and reopened Urgent Appeal cases over the past few months, in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India, among others. These include cases where garment workers have been illegally fired for joining trade unions, freedom of association rights have been repressed in factories, and cases where workers have been fighting against below minimum-wage pay, the abuse of short term contracts and factory closures.

We also want to share a recent campaign resolution, as workers at the Bravo Tekstil factory in Turkey finally received a compensation agreement for back wages and severance pay after the factory shut down. The workers were making clothes to be sold on UK high streets for Zara, Next, and Mango, and worked for three months without payment before the sudden closure of the factory. We joined with workers in Turkey and international worker rights groups to campaign for the wages owed to them. Zara constituted 75% of the factory's overall production, and the company boasted making record profits up by 30% in the last financial year, yet they, and other brands sourcing from Bravo Tekstil, were reluctant to take responsibility.

After many months of campaigning an agreement was recently reached and we are glad that the workers have now received at least some of what they are owed. Although the compensation figure does not cover all of the money owed to them, the workers showed their resilience to the world. The impact of global solidarity is also clear, as actions took place across Europe and online, holding brands to account.

Bangladeshi Workers On Hunger Strike

Bangladeshi garment workers are paid some of the lowest wages in the global garment industry. The current minimum monthly wage of 5,300 taka (approximately £50) has not been increased since 2013 and is well below any credible living wage. On such levels of poverty pay workers struggle to meet their basic needs, including being able to afford enough food to eat, rent payments and health care costs. The minimum wage paid to Bangladeshi garment workers denies them a decent life.

Garment workers have been demanding a minimum wage increase to 16,000 taka (roughly £150), as well as calling for a statutory framework to govern pay grades and promotion, alongside other welfare measures. There is broad support for these demands from trade unions, NGOs and worker rights groups. However, actions by trade unions, calling for these concrete demands to be met, have been greeted with government repression, including arrests and threats to freedom of association and other human rights.

On 12th October garment workers continued their struggle with a one-day hunger strike. Labour Behind the Label and Clean Clothes Campaign partners worldwide supported them by sharing their message, #WeDemandTk16000, and by asking all brands sourcing from Bangladesh to show support. We called on brands including H&M, Gap, Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Primark, Next, and Sainsbury's to make a long-term commitment to continue sourcing from Bangladesh after the wage increase, to increase the prices paid to their suppliers to allow for this wage increase, and to express their concern to the Bangladeshi government about the repression and harassment of trade union leaders. To date, none of these brands have stepped up to publicly support the increase.

Now is the time for brands to demonstrate that there is more than mere lip service behind their expressed desire to pay a living wage. Now is the time to make this a reality and to ensure their workers are no longer forced to live in poverty.

Bangladesh Safety Accord in Jeopardy

Following the devastation of the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh, April 2013, in which over 1,134 garment workers were killed and thousands more injured, the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety was signed. This legally-binding agreement between trade unions and clothing companies ran for five years, and on its expiration date in May 2018, 85% of the safety problems identified in factories had been resolved. There exists, however, on going safety concerns, such as fire safety measures, thus the 2018 Transition Accord was brought into force in June 2018.

The three-year Transition Accord, signed by 192 garment brands, will continue the vital work of the first Accord until the government of Bangladesh is ready to take over. The Transition Accord and process has been agreed by the Accord signatories, trade unions, the Bangladeshi government, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the BGMEA, the Bangladeshi employers' organisation. There is, however, a major roadblock to ensuring the safety of garment factories in Bangladesh. Following a legal challenge by Smart Jeans Ltd, a Bangladeshi factory producing for export, a restraining order against the Accord has been issued by the High Court of Bangladesh. The injunction could mean the Accord must cease operation and leave Bangladesh on 30th November, without allowing for a smooth transition of powers to the government.

Should the restraining order remain in place, there will be major and potentially life-threatening consequences to millions of garment workers. All parties, including the ILO and Accord signatories, agree that the Bangladeshi government does not currently have the capacity or knowledge to take over all functions of the Accord. Although the legally-binding elements will remain in place, without a base in Bangladesh it would be very challenging for the Accord to function. As we go to press there are ongoing legal hearings taking place in Bangladesh over the fate of the Accord. Labour behind the Label, along with a whole host of others (including the EU) are urging the Bangladeshi government to petition the High Court to prioritise the safety of their workers and cancel the restraining order. We are calling on brands to support this.

Invisible Threads Art Auction Success

Labour Behind the Label would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in our Invisible Threads Art Auction. In particular, we would like to thank all of the artists who so kindly supported us by contributing their work, as well as all those who raised valuable funds by bidding so generously. Held in central Bristol, with bidding available online for those who couldn't attend the event, we raised an amazing £2,800 on the night, all of which will go directly towards our work campaigning for garment workers rights worldwide.

Over 50 artists, both local and international, donated their work for auction, with the artwork including stunning landscapes, intimate portraits and beautiful earrings. Each artist responded in their own way to the broad themes of worker/consumer solidarity, women's rights, transparency, human rights, and fashion. Following the auction, we have 9 prints of The Body, generously donated by the artist Ruby Taylor, available to buy at £30 each plus pp. All proceeds will help us continue our work, so please do get in touch if you would like one.

We hope that this will be the first of many fundraising art auctions, so if you are an artist who would like to donate your work to support Labour Behind the Label, then we would love to hear from you.

Ruby Taylor / The Body

Support Labour Behind the Label by becoming a regular donor

Campaigning and lobbying on a range of levels – company, government, public and educational – can achieve long term sustainable global change.

You can help us achieve this by becoming a friend of the campaign and a regular supporter. The easiest way to manage your donation is by visiting our website, **labourbehindthelabel.org/donate**

We suggest a monthly minimum of £5 or annual donation of £60.

If you are an organisation such as a Trade Union or NGO and would like to show your support for our campaign, **please consider becoming an affiliate**.

With the fight for workers' rights needed now more than ever, please consider becoming a regular donor for our campaign

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